

An Address at the
Dinner and Gala in honour of the visit of
Dr. John Waterbury, President, American University of Beirut
Marriott Hotel, Ottawa
March 14, 2003

Maureen O'Neil, President
International Development Research Centre (Canada)

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is both a personal pleasure and an honour to join you here tonight as friends and alumni of the American University of Beirut.

In its long and illustrious history, AUB has distinguished itself as a remarkable institution of learning and research. Through difficult and sometimes dangerous times, the success of AUB has demanded—and fostered—special attributes of wisdom, tenacity, and courage. Allow me to add that these same qualities are fully demonstrated by the university's President, John Waterbury.

My admiration for AUB—and my sense of the challenges it has had to meet—arise naturally from our own experience promoting policy-relevant development research in the Middle East. Since its founding in 1970, IDRC has been active in the region and familiar with the impediments to effective research and scholarship.

It is a shocking fact that Arab countries in the last decade spent a smaller fraction of their GDPs on R and D than any other region in the world. And there is this overarching reality: Good research is too often ignored in policy, or suppressed in political hostility.

In spite of these difficulties (indeed, because of them) IDRC has continued to seek out and support partnerships for development research throughout the Middle East. We have focused on the development needs felt most intensely by the people of the region themselves: sustainable and equitable water management, economic change, peace and security, and constructing a new future for the region's millions of refugees. With ever-increasing urgency, we are concentrating on the hard imperatives of good governance, and the preparations that democratic government requires.

Over the years, some of IDRC's most innovative and productive partnerships have thrived in Beirut, at the American University.

I am thinking, for example, of an exceptionally creative research project in post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation, housed in AUB's Center for Behavioral Research. The object there was to explore not the conventional elements of physical or economic reconstruction, but the more elusive psycho-social and cultural underpinnings essential to post-conflict recovery.

A second example of AUB-IDRC partnership—and a source of great pride to us all—has already enhanced the lives of poor people and enlarged Lebanon's development capacity. This is a case study in the sustainable improvement of marginal lands, centred in a village in the Lebanese highlands. The emphasis here has been on soil and water conservation, but its scope has embraced issues such as the promotion of non-agricultural incomes for women. And importantly, it has engaged local people directly in the research—strengthening the capacity of their own community.

I am happy to say that Shadi Hamadeh, Chairman of AUB's Department of Animal Sciences, joined us just last week to spend a six-month sabbatical at IDRC preparing a book on this fascinating research. It is a privilege to welcome him to Ottawa.

In many respects, these partnerships between IDRC and AUB exhibit the best characteristics of development research. They make poverty reduction their first priority. They involve poor people, in their communities, as active research collaborators. And they aim always to inform and encourage governance that will be open, fair, effective, and accountable.

These are values that AUB has done much to preserve and advance in the Middle East. I commend all of you in the AUB community for that achievement.

And for your hospitality here this evening, I thank you.